

CAN ENGLAND EVER BE WORLD CHAMPIONS AGAIN? BY ROB SMITH, LONDON WASPS (ENGLAND) ACADEMY MANAGER.

This article will look at the potential for England not only to retain their World Cup crown in 2007 but also at the potential to win the Webb Ellis Trophy in future years. This potential depends on the identification and development of young players and, hence, analysis of the current process: *is it working? If not, why not?*

At the recent Football World Cup 2006, Graham Taylor commented that, in his view, England under their current structure, “Would never win the World Cup again.” This came after the squad had been hyped to the rafters, leaving many believing this year was going to be the best challenge England could have made with the strongest squad of players. The hype was most likely made for commercial reasons but, nonetheless, many believed this to be the case. The reality proved very different, so much so that it led Graham Taylor to make these comments. I think, after witnessing the quality of players processed by other countries, his comments struck home even with many of the more one-eyed supporters.

We have an outstanding World Class player in Wayne Rooney; well, several of the other countries clearly demonstrated they have *several* Wayne Rooneys in their squad, not least Argentina, Brazil, Spain and Italy. Most pundits agreed that our best, or most effective, player in the tournament turned out to Owen Hargreaves; interestingly, he plays his regular football in Germany.

How does this experience of the Football World Cup relate to our potential to win the Rugby World Cup in the future? Well, the base lines of the structures are very similar, not least in the fact that primary player contracts are held by the clubs and not by the ruling body administration. Now it is easy to highlight this as the reason. However, the football countries I have listed also have primary contracts held by the clubs and it is the same in French rugby, where the primary player contracts are held by the clubs yet, as a playing nation, they seem to have greater potential year on year.

The issue of primary contracts makes the player development process easier for the national team if the ruling body holds them. Such a system is operational in Ireland, Wales and Scotland and there seems to be improvement in the regional and national team performances. However, this cannot be the sole reason and do England continually need to be looking back at something that, if changed now, would cause untold damage to the domestic game - if indeed it were at all legally possible.

Before the recent England v New Zealand Autumn international, Sir Clive Woodward outlined in a pre-match interview the key factors towards England achieving success. These were players' fitness, availability and a reduced match programme. He said, "The coaching team can only develop the team if the players are fit, able to train and available." At the risk of yet again highlighting a rift between club and country, do we really need to keep banging our heads time after time against the same wall? The system we have is a reality, but surely we must find ways to work within the existing framework; other countries can do it, so why not England?

Successful, robust and vibrant clubs are vitally important to the development of a successful national team. Club and Country must work hand in hand to head successfully towards this goal. For the national squad coaches simply to want more *control of* and *time with* the players is unrealistic in the current environment. It is a bit like wanting to have the ability to control the weather during the week of your planned holiday; we need to accept the environment we work in and learn to cope and be successful within this environment. Adjustments are required, but we have the strongest playing base in the world. We possess highly talented players and, via the Academy structure, excellent player identification and development up to the age of eighteen. The problem and solution, I suggest, lie with the development opportunities available post-eighteen. Get this right and the playing base of top quality players would increase, providing flexibility and depth to the squads.

So, going back to the original question - can England win the World Cup again? I should add an extra phrase to the question and it is, 'under the current structure.' At the simplest level all the evidence suggests, as with the national football team, that the answer is no. However, young players are developing through this existing system; Anthony Allen has just been capped by England at the age of twenty, so let us have a look at what stage he is at, where he has come from and the reasons why he has made this progression.

QUESTIONS –

- 1) Was he the finished article when capped? No.
- 2) Does he have World Class potential? Yes.
- 3) Is the national team a developmental area for players? Yes, to a degree, particularly with matches between World Cups - a finishing school if you prefer.
- 4) Was he at this development stage - that is, should have played? Yes.
- 5) How did he get there? Because he had good development from twelve to eighteen at Millfield School, Harlequins and the Academy and, most significantly, has played a number of senior club matches for his club, Gloucester, already.
- 6) Will all aspiring young stars be able to follow this pathway? No, not necessarily post-eighteen.

How can this be improved?

From next season across England, 'Schools of Rugby' will be introduced. For players aged between twelve and eighteen this is a significant new pathway, designed to improve the current identification systems and development pathways currently provided via the Academy process.

Let us look at the route for a talented young player from the age of twelve, a player with World Class potential. It will be known that he possesses excellent levels of speed, athleticism and coordination and he will work hard and has a positive attitude to physicality and contact. Let's see if, under the current system, he can get to the international stage, fully developed and ready for this top class competition; it is also important to examine the opportunities and pitfalls.

The first step for this twelve year old centre will be to attend a School of Rugby assessment session (now replacing EPDC assessment process). The player will need to be nominated by his school or club, so the first potential issue for this young player is this: are there coaches of the required ability to recognise his potential and will the schools and clubs be aware of and support the process?

Hopefully, at this first stage, the net will be quite wide and the objective of the Schools of Rugby will have been communicated clearly to all relevant parties to ensure they are aware this is not a team-based initiative, but purely a programme of individual development which will benefit the schools and clubs. Equally, a critical factor for the player, club and school will be that the player receives quality coaching at these sessions. There will be not too many difficult issues to resolve, so he should pass the assessment process.

The player is now at the School of Rugby and assessments will take place and they will be conducted by coaches of the required level. Academy staff will be involved at this stage in the process in an assessment role. The player will be receiving one session per month then, based on performance, he will move through the development levels to a higher group. At the higher levels the Academy coaches, along with appointed Schools of Rugby coaches, should be involved with the delivery of the programme. Academy staff should also be delivering a coach education programme to all relevant nominated coaches.

For an identified player between twelve and sixteen who is attending the School of Rugby, the Academy English Player Development Centre (EPDC) will be available to provide the player again with a training opportunity alongside the highest identified level age group players within the region; one session per month will be delivered by Academy coaches. Match programming will be integrated for this talented young player into the programme in the post-Christmas calendar, dovetailing into the school and club match programme. The sessions will be increased and extra players added to the squad. The player will follow the County, Divisional and International team selection pathway up to sixteen years of age.

From the age of sixteen to eighteen the player will either follow the Conference or Divisional pathway. This entails monitoring and development via the Academy structure for the Conference player or county/school development structures for the Divisional player.

So we now have our young, potentially World Class player through to eighteen, having most likely played County, Divisional and International age group rugby at U16 and U18 levels. He has been regularly coached by top quality coaches and has played also for school and/or his club. He will have most likely have been involved with a Premiership Club and trained with the 1st XV squad and played 'A' Team fixtures. If he wants it, a contractual offer to train full-time will be available to him. Also, he may have completed 'A' level studies and will have options open to him academically or for vocational training. He may well have followed the Apprenticeship route between sixteen and eighteen and might be well entrenched into Premiership Club life.

Anthony Allen gained a 1st XV selection at Gloucester on merit aged nineteen and his progression justifies the development process to this point. From here on, the progress of our young centre depends on the immediate needs of each club. Can his progression be guaranteed to fulfil his potential?

Well, development in the area of Strength and Conditioning will be rapid. Should the player secure a regular 1st XV selection then his progress with game understanding, technical skills and mental toughness will also be rapid. However, there is a massive intangible for all players, remembering that our young player, now eighteen, has previously had little experience of professional rugby and, especially with forwards, will have still some way to go to cope with the sheer physicality of the Premiership. It is just as hard in a different way for fly-halves and scrum-halves in key decision making roles.

All the most talented young players are faced with this challenge and only the very few can hope for regular 1st XV involvement. Where can a young player access the required level of match programming to fulfil potential? Clubs are making positive links with National Division 1 and Division 2 Clubs to provide the match programming these players require. The 'A' League fixture schedule falls some way short of providing the required levels of performance development these players require in terms of game understanding, responsibility, tactical awareness and decision making.

These links with partnership clubs need further development if our player is to maximise his potential. There are issues such as relaxation of registration, cross-club integrated coaching structures and, most of all, the partnership club becoming the accepted first step for a talented young player just out of school. There must be training in a co-ordinated manner between the Premiership Club and the Partnership club with the match programme being initially at the Partnership club; then there is the task of competing for a place week in, week out. In simple terms, our young player needs to earn his stripes from eighteen onwards.

The effect of this would serve the needs of the club and country. Premiership squads could be significantly reduced with no compulsory 'A' league fixture list, in effect cutting costs and easing work loads for staffing resources. A larger pool of Premiership level players would be created, thus easing the need to over-play players. England would have a larger, fresher group of players to work with and the greater competition would drive the performance standard upwards.

Just a word is needed regarding the Partnership clubs, those that choose to link with this system. They should be offered incentives and they must be encouraged to develop their own development structure with local clubs in their area so that the issues affecting the top of the game are not simply passed down to a lower level. Eventually you would reach a point where a player, due to his performance level, would only need to train twice per week and play at weekends to fulfil development requirements. Hence, all clubs involved within the development structure post-eighteen would have pools of players available to them, albeit at different levels, but they would be playing regularly. Movement between these groups would be based on performance within a competitive playing structure and not based on *perceived* potential.

So, back to the current structure. What happens to our young player at the moment? He joined a Premiership Club, trained hard, increased body mass by 10% in year one and increased strength by 8%, played a handful of senior club matches and several 'A' team matches in the season. He was selected for Junior National Academy, Senior National Academy, England U21s and England capped him at nineteen. He was dropped by England after one game due to performance errors and is now back at club level, learning the trade. Current assessments suggest he will be back in the England squad within two years, getting ready for World Cup 2011 – you may know this player!

This, however, is *not* the likely scenario for the all-talented young players. Most will simply continue to work hard to gain a Premiership place. This work will assist their development in some of the key areas, but several other areas will not be addressed as fully as required and hence a weakness exists in the completion of the development process. It becomes a higher risk as to whether the playing potential will be maximised and throws into question the effort and resource directed at the twelve to eighteen age banding if the final stages cannot be ordered to achieve maximum playing resource potential.

England are, of course, capable of winning the World Cup again - but not under the current structure. Something has to change. If the clubs and country work together, each recognising the needs and requirements of the other, and the pathway for our young potentially World Class players is prioritised, then the future for the domestic game and the International game will be bright. Club and Country do not have a primary role in the development of players; they have some role, but this should simply be via their co-existence with some give and take. Both Club *and* Country can prosper and assist this process to their mutual benefit.